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SUBJECT: FIRST AEC PLENARY OF 2008 UPBEAT

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: A briefing by the NCP and the SPLM on their recent political deal drew a large turnout to the first AEC Plenary session of 2008 on January 8. However the parties provided only vague details of their agreement. The international coordinators and other observers will have to wait until the release of the official implementation "matrix," promised in a day or two, to study the agreement in detail. One detail to emerge is that the SPLM will name an administrator to govern the disputed Abyei region. The NCP will appoint the assistant administrator. Both sides highlighted the fact that they had forged new lines of communication and reached the agreement without outside intervention. END SUMMARY

Wait for the Matrix  
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¶2. (U) With many participants and observers eager to know the details of the deal that ended the ten-week political crisis, the AEC plenary was much better attended than normal. They were disappointed when both sides said they would not go into details, but instead promised that the "matrix" containing all the details of the agreement soon would be handed over to the AEC chairman for distribution to the Coordinators and other international observers.

¶3. (U) Both sides stressed that the big news to come out of the agreement was that the two parties had achieved it without outside intervention. The NCP in particular stressed that they remain committed to the AEC as "the most important institution" established by the CPA, and urged the international coordinators to remain engaged. The SPLM delegates stressed that, but for a few small incidents, the two parties had maintained their "strategic ceasefire" throughout the crisis.

Joint administration in Abyei  
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¶4. (U) NCP negotiator and Presidential Adviser Sayed el Khatib announced that the CPA partners had agreed to place the disputed Abyei region under an administration to be led by an appointee of the SPLM, with the assistant to be appointed by the NCP. This is a temporary arrangement until a final agreement can be worked out. Both sides confirmed that the Abyei portfolio now lies with the GNU presidency.

Presidential committee to tackle contentious issues  
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¶5. (U) An NCP representative told the session that one provision of the political agreement calls for a standing committee under the Presidency, with representatives of the two parties. The committee is to meet "continually" on the more contentious issues still outstanding on CPA implementation.

Mid-Term review to stress "unity"  
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¶6. (U) Norwegian Ambassador Fridtjov Thorkildsen, as acting AEC chairman, noted that the next big challenge for the AEC is to draft

a mid-term review on implementation of the CPA. He said that under the terms of the presidential decree establishing the CPA, this report "is to focus on the unity arrangements." He suggested that he appoint an ad hoc committee, with a representative from each party, to work out the "terms of reference" for the review. This committee will aim to present a draft at the next AEC plenary, which should be February 26. (Note: The AEC plans to revert to plenary sessions held on the last Tuesday of each month).

17. (U) Ambassador Thorkildsen, coordinators, and the international observers congratulated the two parties on working out a solution to end their standoff. He concluded the session saying "this meeting has confirmed my impression that this marks a new spirit of cooperation between the two CPA parties." He encouraged the two sides to continue with the series of "formal and informal" communications they forged during the crisis to avoid future crises.

18. (SBU) COMMENT: The spirit of good-will and cooperation on display at plenary was refreshing, particularly to those who had grown exasperated by the foot-dragging, mutual recriminations, and nitpicking that had characterized most AEC meetings in 2007 but this will be difficult to sustain given underlying tensions. Along with the other observers, we look forward to release of the promised "matrix" of the agreement to assist us in planning for upcoming Working Group meetings. We will all be working to sustain the feel-good atmosphere, even as we push to wring as much progress as possible from the two sides in the months ahead. Post will forward a copy of the matrix as soon as we receive it.

FERNANDEZ